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ABSTRACT

The development of the concept of God was assessed among 120 children between the ages of 5 to 16 years who attended private Protestant and Catholic day schools in the San Diego area. All children participated in a semi-clinical interview. Twelve interview questions were asked as the first step of a probing technique used to initiate a dialogue between the examiner and child. Probing and transcribing of responses continued until answers became repetitive or no response was forthcoming. Responses were listed according to order of appearance across three age levels (5-8, 9-12, 13-16) and were categorized in terms of level (I or II) according to their concreteness or abstractness. Data were analyzed for each of the 12 questions for each denomenational group using a chi square test of significance to assess the relative strength of the relationship between the age by level distinction. A second chi square procedure was then applied to the data to assess the relative strength of the effects of formal religious instruction on the concrete/abstract level of response at each age level. Results suggest that the view of God of young children does not differ across religious affiliation/background. However, with development and increasing flexibility in thinking abstractly, it appears that instruction can have an impact on the child's view of God. (Author/RH)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN CHILDREN

Presented at the USC-UAP
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Los Angeles, California
January 31, 1981

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The Development of the Concept of God in Children

The history of psychology reveals a continuing interest in attempting to understand the religious activities of man. Though men like Wundt (1902, 1916) and Galton (Blacker, 1946; Talbert, 1933) are not ordinarily considered classical psychologists of religion, their degressions into this specialized branch of general psychology are indicative of a unique interest in the area of religious development. The work we share with you today is equally indicative of our interest in the area of religious development as specifically related to the development of the concept of God in children 5 to 16 years of age.

The subject of religious conceptualization in children has received a measure of attention in the religious and secular scientific literature in recent times. Some of the more recent investigations have approached religious concept development from a Piagetian perspective. A comparison of several of these investigations has provided a clear relationship between Piaget's theory of cognitive development and the development of religious concepts (Fleck, Ballard, & Reilly, 1975).

The phenomena of religious conceptualization has been studied from many perspectives including denominational identity (Elkind, 1961; 1962; 1963), the understanding of prayer (Long, Elkind, & Spilka, 1967), and religious maturity (Allen, 1965; Allen, & Spilka, 1967). All of these investigations reported the existence of a stagewise differentiation that tended to lend credence to the Piagetian theory of general cognitive development.

The study of the development of the child's concept of God has been the subject of several important investigations (Babin, 1965; Deconchy, 1965; Goldman, 1965; Harms, 1944) Researchers have had children draw pictures of their idea of God; provide a written response to a question about what God means to them; complete free association tasks; respond in an interview about what religious pictures and stories might mean. In each case it was reported that there appears to be a stagewise distinction in the development of the concept of God which is quite similar to Piaget's preoperational, concrete operational,and formal operational stages of cognitive development.

The purpose of the present study is to assess the progression of the development of the concept of God in children between the ages of 5 to 16 years, and across religious affiliations, i.e., Protestant and Catholic. That is, we wanted to see if the socialization influence of formal religious instruction revealed developmental distinction in the evolution of the child's concept of God. Specifically, the following questions are asked:

1. Is there a stage specific progression in the development of the child's concept of God which approximates the general cognitive stages suggested by Piaget and others?
2. If so, what are the stage characteristics and age parameters which might differentiate children from different religious backgrounds?

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects for this investigation were 120 children 5 to 16 years of age equally divided into Protestant and Catholic groups. All of the children attended privat Protestant and Catholic day schools in the San Diego area. The Protestant group consisted of 33 males and 27 females, while the Catholic group was evenly divided between males and females.

Procedure

All children participated in a semi-clinical interview in which they responded to the following 12 basic questions:

1. Where does God come from?/Where does God live?
2. What does God look like?
3. Where did God get his name?
4. Does God have a family?
5. Does God get mad?
6. Does God know who you are?
7. Can God see and hear you?
8. How old is God?
9. Is God like a person?
10. What are some things God cannot do?
11. What are some things God can do?
12. If you had to compare God to one person you know, who would it be?

These questions followed no specific order but were used to initiate a dialogue between the examiner and child on the given topic.

The examiner transcribed all verbal responses verbatim. Responses to these basic questions served as a foundation for further comparative inquiry and probing. For example, when the examiner asked: "Where does God live?", a frequent response was: "Up in the sky." The examiner would then ask "Where at in the sky?" and the child's responses were recorded. This interview probing technique continued until the answers either became repetitive or the child indicated he was unable to respond any further to the question.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Data for this study were taken from the verbatim recordings of the examiner. Responses were listed according to order of appearance across the three age levels. The responses were placed in either Level I or Level II based on a concrete/abstract distinction. Table I gives samples of Level I & II type responses for each question evaluated.

Table I: Examples of Level I & II type responses offered by children during a semi-clinical interview.

Question		
1.	Level I:	sky
	II:	everywhere
2.	Level I:	long hair, beard, blue eyes
	II:	bright light, glow
3.	Level I:	father, mother
	II:	always had it
4.	Level I:	mom, dad
	II:	Christians, everyone on earth
5.	Level I:	say bad words
	II:	sin
6.	Level I:	He's smart
	II:	He knows everybody
7.	Level I:	He has eyes/ears
	II:	He is "in charge" of every person's life
8.	Level I:	32 years
	II:	no one knows, he doesn't have an age
9.	Level I:	yes
	II:	like a spirit
10.	Level I:	'act upon people' (i.e., make you sick)
	II:	everything
11.	Level I:	jump rope; eat rocks
	II:	sin; nothing
12.	Level I:	Mary, Joseph
	II:	nobody, you can't compare

The data were analyzed for each of the 12 questions for each denominational group using a 2 X 3 design for a chi square test of significance to assess the relative strength of the relationship between the age X level distinction. A second chi square procedure was then applied to the data for a denominational X level of response interaction to assess the relative strength of the effects of formal religious instruction on the concrete/abstract level of response at each age level.

The application of the chi square procedure to the data provides a description of the proportional differences in Level I and Level II responses, such that, which ever group shows a higher proportion of raw score responses at a given level, is in fact demonstrating a significantly different number of responses from the other group.

Global Assessment

An overall assessment of the age X level of response X religious affiliation showed a significant difference between Level I and Level II type responses for all questions for the Protestant group and all but one question for the Catholic group.

Religious Affiliation Effects Assessment

The Graphs (Appendix A) are those data presented in percentage comparisons of age level X religious affiliation for each question. The significant findings of these data are presented in Table II.

The results of the investigation reveal several interesting phenomena. First, the age X level of response distinction for both the Protestant and Catholic groups would seem to generally support the Piagetian view of cognitive development when applied to the development of the concept of God.

Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly is the characteristics related to the child's development of the God concept. As can be seen in Table II,

TABLE II

The age X level of response X religious affiliation for each question (i.e., CI means there was significant difference between the Protestant and Catholic groups on this question with the Catholic group using more Level I type responses).

	5-8	9-12	13-16
1		C-I	
2			
3	P-I	P-I	C-I
4			C-I
5			C-I
6		C-I	C-I
7		C-I	
8			C-I
9			
10			C-I
11			
12	P-I	P-I	

as the child grows older, the religious socialization effects on Level I and II type responses becomes more clear. For example, in the 5-8 years age group, there appears to be little difference between the Protestant and Catholic children's perspective of God.

Looking at the 9-12 year age group, we begin to see a shift in the discriminating character of the Protestant and Catholic children's view of God.

As we move to the 13-16 year age group, we observe an even clearer move in the distinction of the child's view of God based on religious affiliation. What is interesting is that at this level we see a significant interaction in which the Catholic children used more Level I types responses than the Protestant children.

Conclusions

Two features seem to stand out in this investigation. One is the developmental effects and the second is the religious socialization effects (i.e., religious affiliation). For young children, their view of God (as tapped by these 12 questions) is not different regardless of religious affiliation/background. However, with development and increasing flexibility in thinking abstractly, it would appear that tuition can have an impact on the child's view of God. That is, the younger the child is the less immediate may be the effects of formal religious instruction. It may be that early religious instruction has a cumulative effect at the older age levels but we have not as yet addressed that question.

The reasons for this trend in the use of Level I type responses were not readily apparent. We are probably going to have to examine religious instructional curriculum, methods, and church doctrine in order to begin to establish some solid interpretative rationale for some of the data reported here.

This investigation is the initial stage of a 4 stage study. The second stage is in process, in which we are collecting similar data from children of a Jewish background to use for comparison with the two religious groups reported here. The third stage of our study will be to ask adult religious leaders (i.e., pastors, sunday school, catechism, and Hebrew school teachers) what they think children's concept of God is like. That is, what do they think children think about God? And the fourth stage will be to evaluate current religious curriculum in light of the above findings. We would welcome further discussion with anyone interested in this work.

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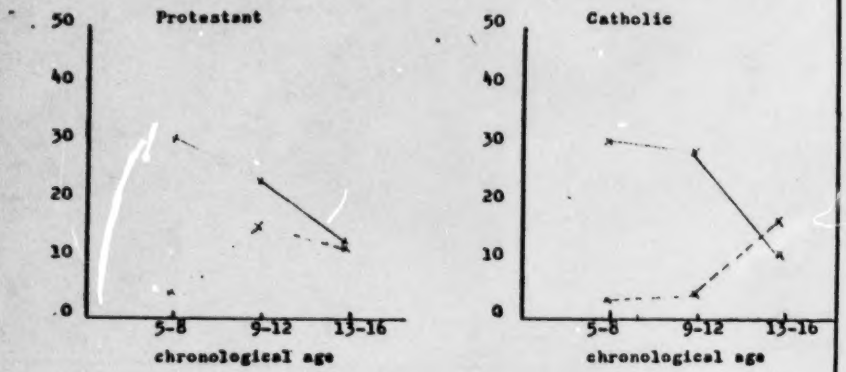
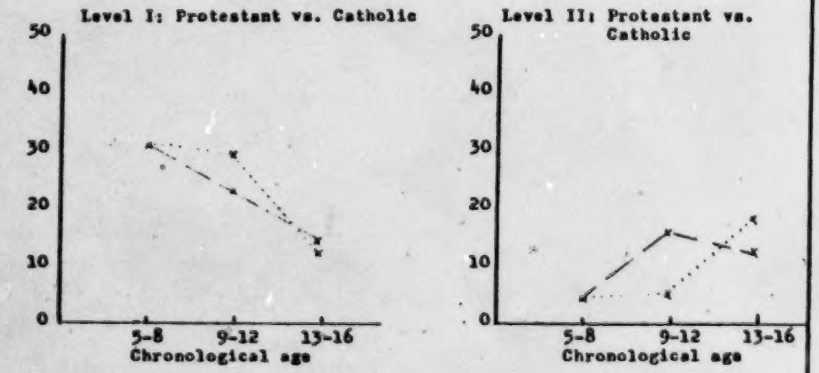
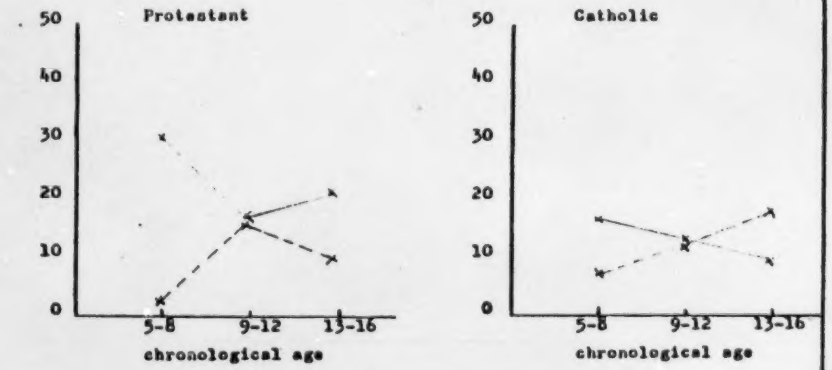
APPENDIX A

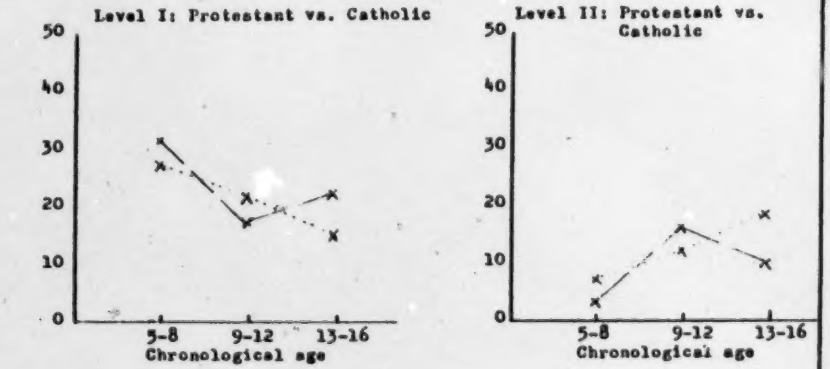
1. Where does God come from?/Where does God live?



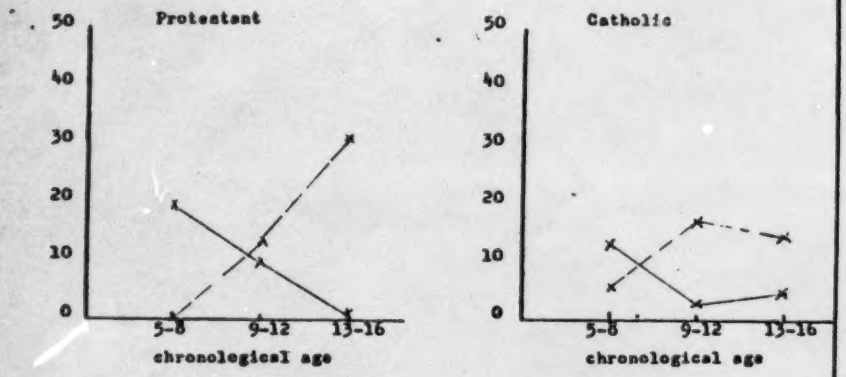


2. What does God look like?





3. Where did God get his name?



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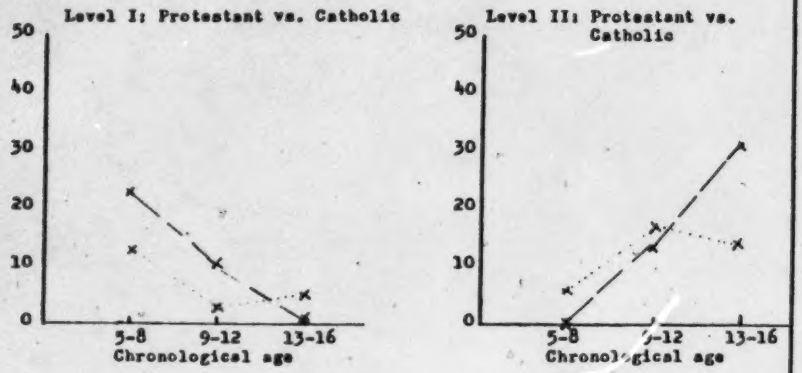
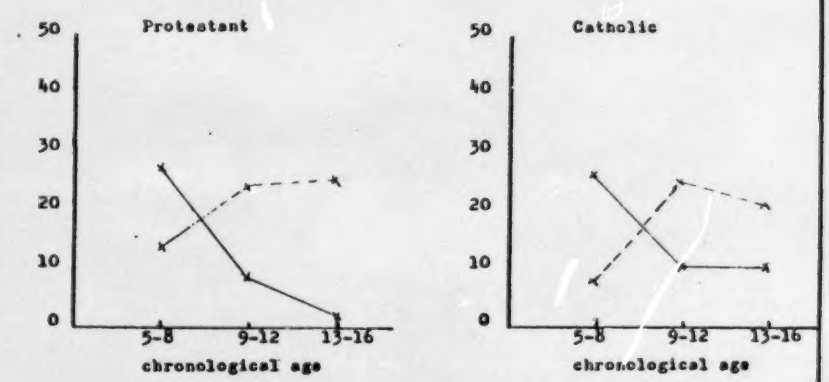


Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

4. Does God have a family?



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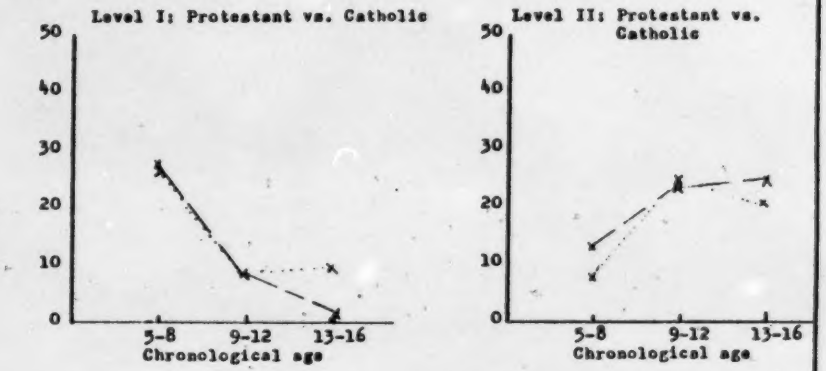
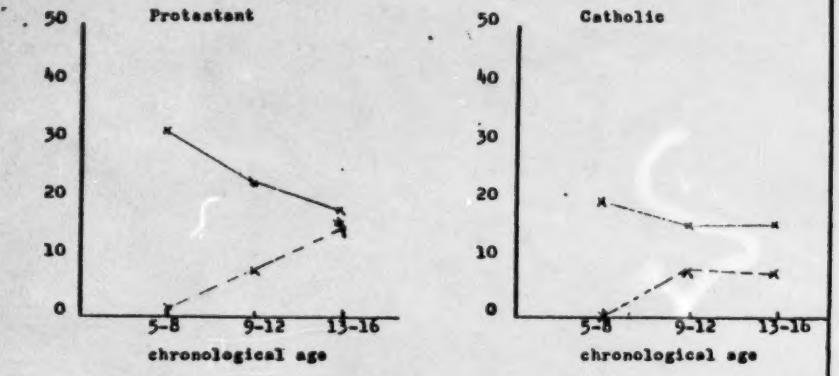


Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

5. Does God get mad?



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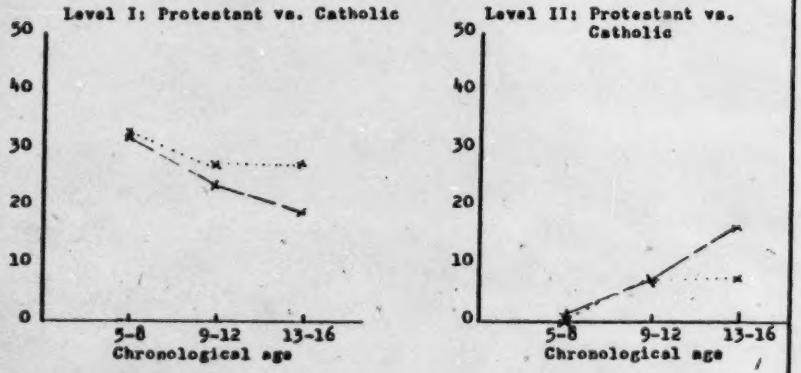
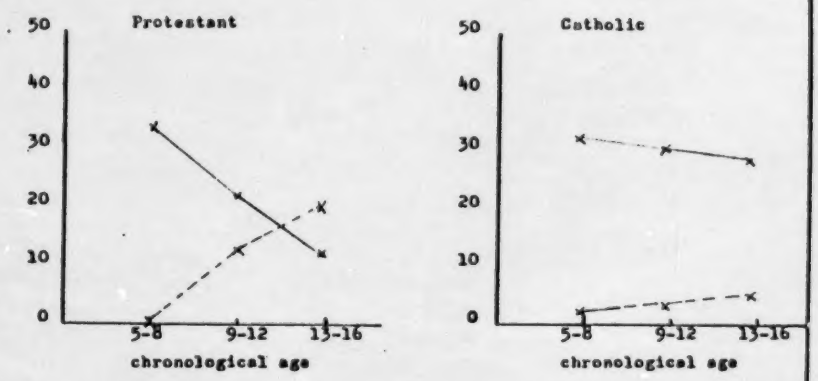


Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

6. Does God know who you are?



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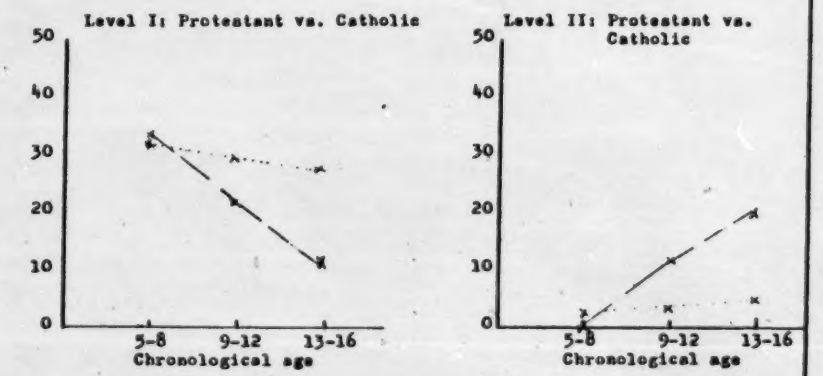
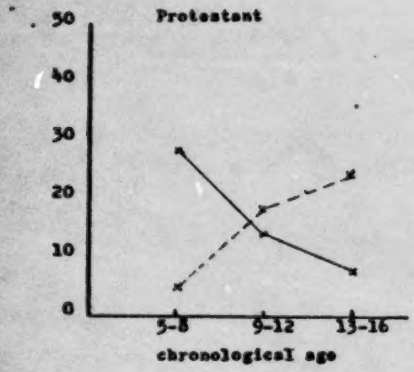
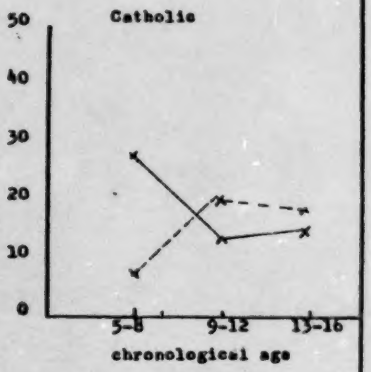


Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

7. Can God hear and see you?





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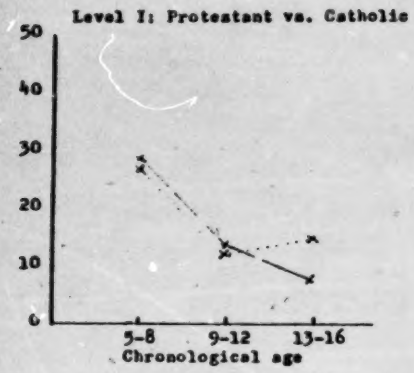
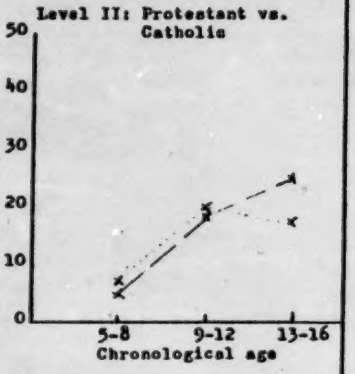
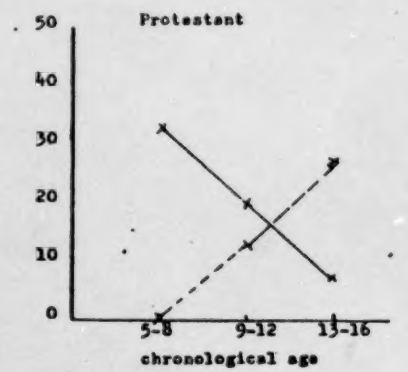
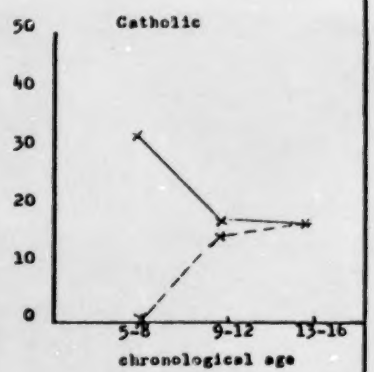




Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

8. How old is God?





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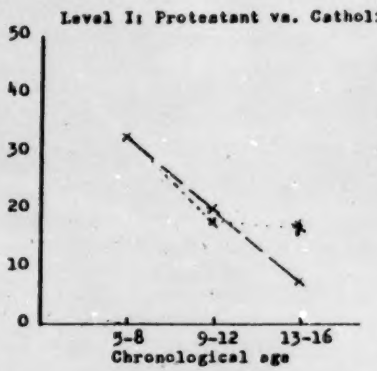
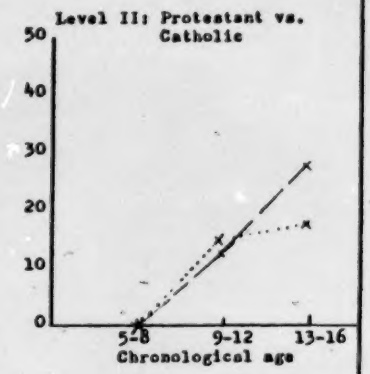
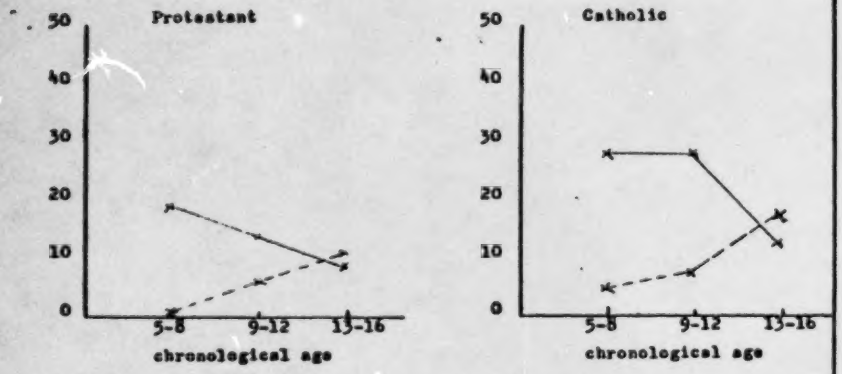




Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

9. Is God like a person? How?/Explain?



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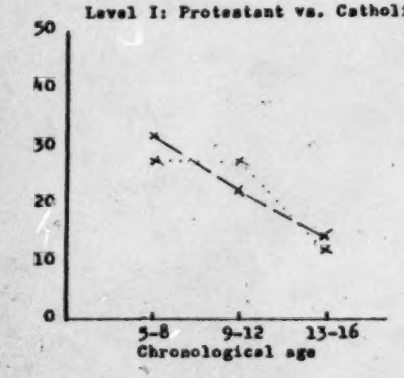
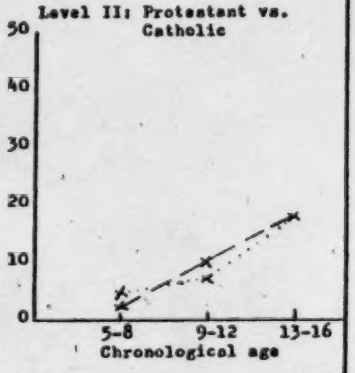
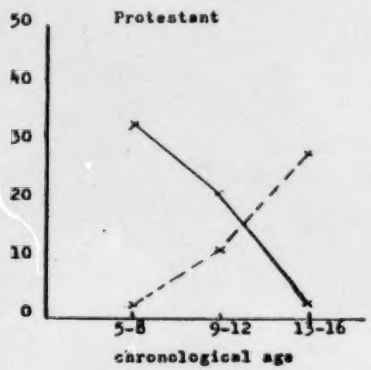
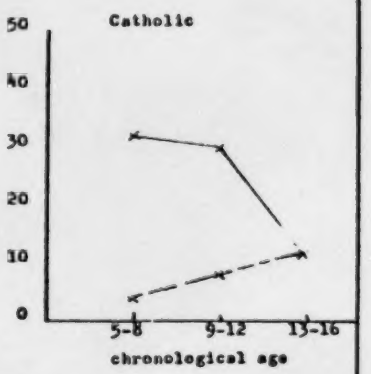




Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

10. What are some things God can do?





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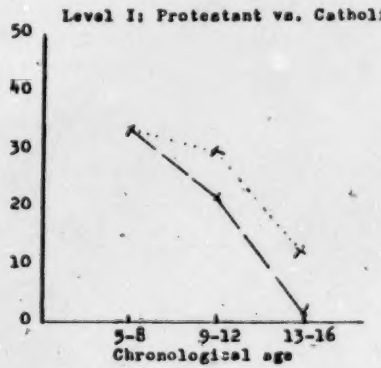
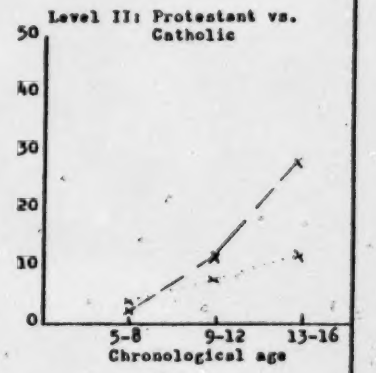
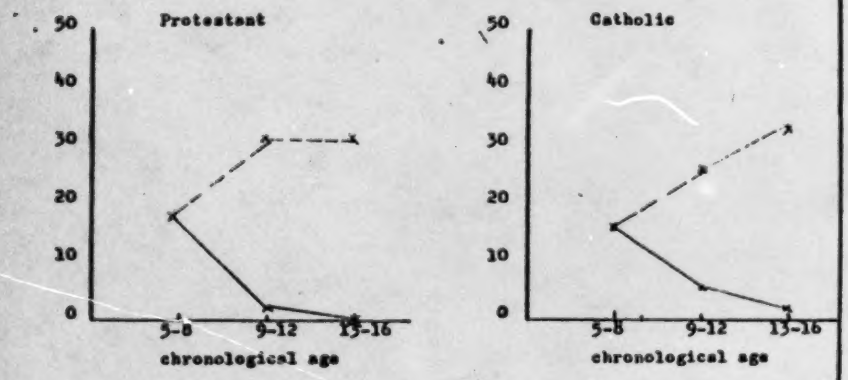


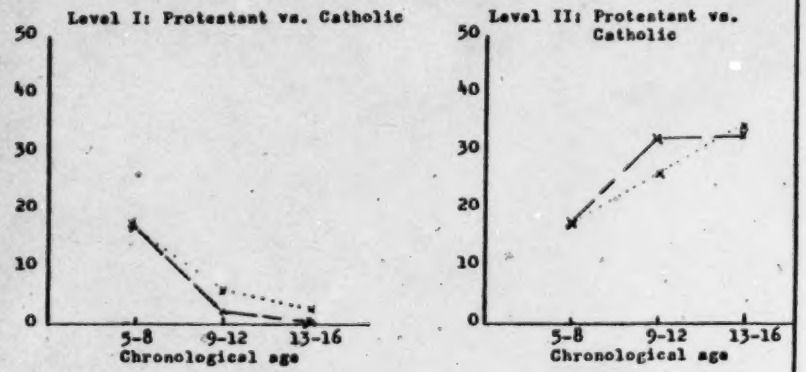


Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

11. What are some things God can't do?

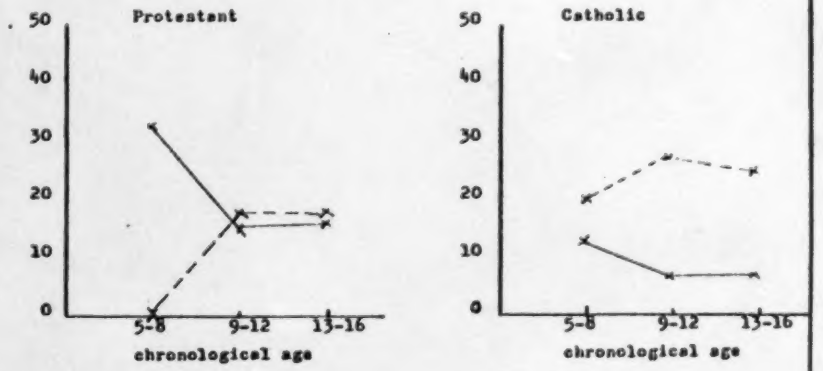


Level I: ———
Level II: ------

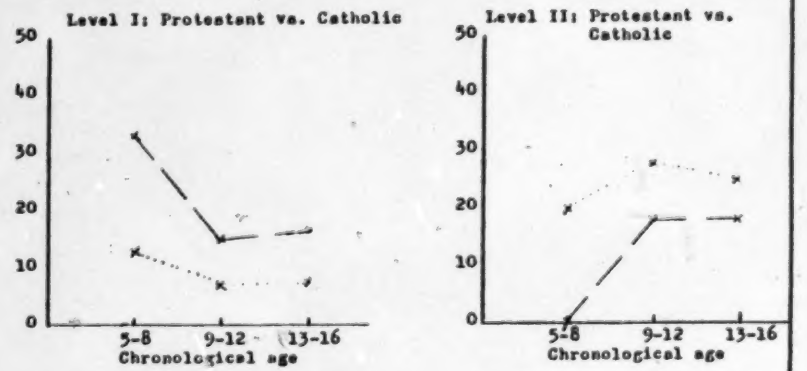


Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....

12. If you had to compare God to 1 person you know, who would it be?



Level I: ———
Level II: ------



Protestant: — — —
Catholic: .....